



**Managed Decline: The Victorian Government's
Commitment to Melbourne's Rivers**

**A Community Discussion Paper
Prepared by Environment Victoria, May 2006**

SUMMARY

This discussion paper is designed to provide the community with an assessment of the Victorian Government’s commitments to return water to the rivers managed under the Central Region Sustainable Water Strategy (SWS). The Victorian Government, in its draft SWS currently open for public comment, defines a SWS as a “planning framework for deciding on large scale, long-term changes in water use”.

Environment Victoria’s assessment of the draft SWS has found:

- Government claims that it will return 66 000 ML to Melbourne’s stressed rivers is a gross exaggeration. Environment Victoria estimates the real amount of new water recovered for the environment to be around 10,200 ML;
- The SWS fails to meet the minimum standards for environmental flows in the majority of the region’s rivers. Failure to return water to meet even minimum scientific environmental flow recommendations will increase the number of toxic blue green algal blooms; make localised fish extinctions more likely; increase the loss of water-bird habitat; and accelerate the erosion of major community recreational and social assets;
- There is no “large scale, long-term” plan to address the over-allocation of the regions river systems;
- Significantly, the government has not said how the strategy will be financed, or when water will be returned to the region’s rivers; and
- There is concern that the costs of new urban and agricultural water infrastructure will be allocated from the \$200 million environmental contribution levied on water retail companies. This would be a highly inappropriate use of these funds.

Assessment of Government Promises to the Regions Rivers

River	Scientifically recommended minimum increase in flows (ML/yr)	What the SWS promises	What the SWS delivers (using criteria on p.2)
Yarra	20,000	20,000	0
Barwon	4,700	4,700	1,000
Werribee	14,500	6,000	5,000
Moorabool	20,000	6,000	3,500
Maribyrnong	6,900	3,000	700
Bunyip/Tarago	TBA	3,000	0
Thomson/Macalister	47,000	15,000	0
Latrobe	TBA	10,000	TBC
TOTAL	113,100*	67,400	10,200

* excludes recommended flows for Bunyip/Tarago and Latrobe rivers

* A megalitre (ML) is 1 million litres

HOW MUCH WATER WILL OUR RIVERS REALLY GET FROM THE CENTRAL REGION SUSTAINABLE WATER STRATEGY?

Criteria for assessing the Governments proposals

Environment Victoria used the following criteria to assess to Governments promises to return water to the region's rivers under the Central Region Sustainable Water Strategy. In our tally of the water to be returned to the regions rivers we did not include:

- Plans to recover water for one river by taking more water from another river or aquifer;
- Temporary allocations of water to rivers;
- Plans that repackage existing flows. While initiatives to improve the management of existing flows are welcome - they do not increase the volume of water available to rivers;
- Plans to recover water already announced under the White Paper *Securing Our Water Future, Together*;
- Plans that include the discharge of treated sewage as an environmental flow. A CSIRO and Australian Water Association report (2004) noted that there is very little data on the environmental impact of endocrine disrupting chemicals and pharmaceutical and personal care products that enter aquatic ecosystems through treated sewage discharges. International literature suggests exposure to such chemicals can produce significant birth defects in fish and other aquatic life, and impact on human health.

Yarra River

Proposed increase in flows is **20,000ML** (scientifically recommended minimum flow) by:

- Completing Bulk Entitlement for the Yarra to include an environmental entitlement of 20,000ML, 17,000ML of which can be stored for release as required for flow objectives.

This is **not** new water for the Yarra. Although the Bulk Entitlement for urban use is to be capped at 400,000ML, current rates of extraction are below that level, with average annual extraction under the bulk entitlement 320,000ML. Therefore the proposed changes simply limit annual extraction to current levels – which are below the maximum allowable extractions – rather than actually returning water to the Yarra.

Net gain for Yarra = 0ML, although there will be the opportunity for significant improvement in management

Barwon River

Proposed to improve environmental flow regime by **4,700ML** (minimum recommended by scientific report) by:

- Re-allocating 1,000 ML from West Barwon reservoir once the Newlingbrook aquifer comes on-line. The river's gain is the aquifer's loss – in effect Peter is robbed to pay Paul;
- Central Highlands Water to '*continue*' to release part of the discharge from the South Ballarat Treatment Plant (up to 2,000ML) into the Leigh River. This is an existing unsatisfactory practice (treated effluent being called an environmental flow) and is **not** a new initiative;
- Improved flows in the Moorabool will benefit the lower Barwon (no figure given): any extra water has been counted under allocation to the Moorabool so is not extra flow for the Barwon (although the estuary may benefit)

Net gain for the Barwon = 1,000ML at the expense of Newlingbrook aquifer

Moorabool River

Proposed to increase environmental flows by **6,000ML** (minimum recommended increase is 20,000ML) by

- Voluntary buyback scheme for unregulated water diversion licenses and retire them to reallocate the water to the environment = 500 ML. Good, should be more water acquired by this method;
- Re-allocation of water authorities' entitlements to the environment once Cairn Curran reservoir connected to Ballarat and Newlingbrook aquifer connected to Geelong = 2,500ML. Unacceptable because of impacts on Loddon River and Newlingbrook aquifer;
- Redirect treated groundwater discharge from Fyansford quarry into lower Moorabool = 3,000ML. Will provide benefit for estuary but is a constant flow and will have no effect on upper and mid reaches which are the most stressed.

Net gain for the Moorabool mid reaches = 500ML

Net gain for Moorabool lower estuary = 3,500ML

Werribee River

Proposed increase in flows is **6,000ML** (minimum recommended increase 14,500ML) by:

- Substitution of water from the Werribee River with Class A recycled water from the Western Treatment Plant for the Werribee Tourism Precinct =1,000ML. Good option;

- 50% of unallocated inflows to Lake Merrimu assigned to environment, 900ML. This enshrines existing situation, does not create new water. The 50% share proposed to be allocated to consumptive use should be added to the environmental share;
- Piping of Werribee Irrigation District = 4,000ML. Excellent.

Net gain for the Werribee = 5,000 ML

Maribyrnong River

Proposed increase in flows is **3,000ML** (minimum recommended increase 6,900ML) by:

- Voluntary buyback scheme for regulated diversion licenses on Jacksons Creek = 500ML
- Voluntary buyback scheme for unregulated surface water diversions = 200ML;
- Water produced by both these options would be allocated to the environment. Good option, more water should be recovered using this approach;
- Transfer entitlement from Barringo Creek to the environment by securing water from the Melbourne system = 250ML. Direct substitution of water from Melbourne's catchments. Unacceptable because it puts even more pressure on the rivers supplying Melbourne;
- Create an environmental reserve in Rosslynne reservoir by securing water from the Melbourne system = 2050ML. Unacceptable because it puts even more pressure on the rivers supplying Melbourne.

Net gain for Maribyrnong = 700ML

Bunyip/Tarago Rivers

Proposed increase in flows is **3,000ML**, (scientific study not yet complete) by:

- Completing Bulk Entitlement for Tarago and Bunyip rivers, including provision for environmental entitlement in Tarago reservoir.

While the bulk entitlement process is not complete, the SWS suggest that 21,000ML from Tarago reservoir will be granted to Melbourne; 5,000ML to Gippsland towns; and 1,000ML for irrigators giving a total of 27,000ML. Since current usage in the system is 14,000ML, it seems highly unlikely that this process will provide any new water for the Bunyip or Tarago, although management may improve.

Net gain for Bunyip/Tarago = 0ML

Thomson/Macalister Rivers

Proposed increase in flows is **15,000ML** (Scientific study recommends minimum 47,000ML - 10,000ML has already provided) by:

- Channel automation and efficiency savings in the Macalister Irrigation District to be distributed as follows:
 - 5,000ML to Macalister in the short term
 - 8,000ML to Thomson by 2014
 - 2,000ML to Macalister by end of 2014

These initiatives were already announced in the White Paper *Securing Our Water Future, Together* and the SWS provides little additional detail on how they are to be achieved.

In addition to the long time frames, there is reason to be skeptical about efficiency gains by irrigated agriculture providing environmental benefit. While efficiency gains can undoubtedly be made, the water saved is generally put to other agricultural use rather than returned to environmental flows. A surer method of acquiring water for the environment is to buy back licenses.

Option E2 (Channel Automation in the MID) suggests that as much as 30,000ML/year could be saved. If all this water was returned to the river system, flow would begin to approach the scientific minimum

Net gain for Thomson/Macalister = UNKNOWN

Latrobe River

Proposed increase in flows is **10,000ML** (scientific study not yet complete) by:

- Temporarily assigning 10,000ML of unallocated water in Blue Rock reservoir to the Latrobe for 10 years. This does not provide a permanent environmental flow to the Latrobe River.

The scientific assessment of the rivers environmental needs is yet to be completed.

Net gain for the Latrobe = UNKNOWN

Total 'new' flows = 10,200ML
